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ABSTRACT

While numerous studies have identified economic, social, and environmental conditions related to stress, greater stress has been found to be related to poverty, unemployment, assembly line work, crowding, and chronic exposure to noise. These stressful situations most frequently confront people with little personal, economic, or political resources to eliminate or control them. While stress is identified as a major psychological and health hazard, and numerous programs exist to help people reduce stress, there are serious problems with the present approaches to managing stress. Stress management programs are often designed for, and attended by, educated, middle-class participants. For most people confronted with the serious stressors of poverty, racism, and environmental pollution, the typical stress management program is not only unavailable and inaccessible, but also irrelevant, inappropriate, and ineffective. In addition, current stress management programs oversimplify the problems of stress, support a "blame the victim" attitude, and are ultimately self-defeating because they encourage a passive atttitude which reinforces conditions in the system that create stress. Instead of a focus on personal adjustment strategies, empowerment approaches to stress management must be encouraged. (PAS)

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Stress Management as a Pacifier

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ABSTRACT

Stress Management as a Pacifier

Studies relating stress to aversive environmental, social and economic conditions have obvious implications for community programs and political action, but major applications have been at a personal level through stress management techniques. This paper criticizes these misdirected efforts and discusses use of power in distributing and controlling stressors in communities.

Stress and Its Management

In recent years, many studies have identified economic, social, and environmental conditions related to stress. Greater stress has been found to be related to poverty (Dohremwend, 1977), unemployment (Catalano and Dooley, 1973), assembly-line work (Caplan, 1975), crowding (D'Atri, 1975), chronic exposure to noise (Itteison, Proshansky, Rivlin and Winkel, 1974), and a variety of other physical environmental stressors (Sigal, 1980). These stressful situations have the common elements of aversive stimuli confronting people with little personal, economic, or political resources either to eliminate or to control these conditions effectively.

The cognitive, affective, behavioral, and physiological consequences of stress include poorer academic performance, lowered intellectual functioning, greater feelings of helplessness, less tolerance of frustration, less sensitivity to others, and increased social withdrawal (Cohen, 1980). The negative short term and long term effects of stress on physical health are serious, powerful and pervasive (Pelletier, 1977).

The stress research clearly identifies stress as a major psychological and health hazard, and numerous programs have been designed to help people reduce stress. But although the stress research has obvious implications for organizational change, community programs and social action, the major applications have been on a personal level through various cognitive, affective, and behavioral stress management techniques. Progressive relaxation training (Jacobsen, 1964), meditation (Naranjo and Ornstein, 1971), biofeedback (Peper, Ancoli and Quinn, 1979), stress inoculation (Meichenbaum, 1977), autohypnosis and cognitive restructuring (Field and Olsen, 1980), and diet and exercise (Pelletier, 1979)are just a few examples of these personal approaches. These methods are being promoted in the popular media as the answers to the problems of stress. Many community psychologists and other helping

professionals are offering numerous well-attended and frequently lucrative consultation and education programs on these techniques.

Criticisms of Current Stress Management

There are serious problems with the present approaches to managing stress. First, they do not address the needs of those people facing the most stress. Second, they fail to come to grips with the complexity of the problem of stress. Third, they often support a "blame the victim" attitude. And, finally, they are ultimately self-defeating because they undermine the potential of stress to motivate people into working for social change.

An obvious limitation of many of the current stress management programs is that they have been designed for, and attended by, educated middle class participants. Because of their predominantly middle class orientation, these stress management programs typically do not even consider the need of people for economic resources to deal with stressors. Instead, they assume that only psychological and interpersonal resources are necessary. The topics covered in these programs also reflect middle class values, concerns and problems, such as the pressures of executive management positions and the difficulties of business travel. The format of these programs is one similar to that of a classroom (including lectures, reading materials, exercises and assignments), with which educated individuals feel familiar and comfortable. While stress management offers an appealing product for middle class consumers, attention is diverted from the more serious stressors of poverty, racism, and environmental pollution.

To a person confronted with these stressors, the typical stress management program is not only unavailable and inaccessible, but it is also irrelevant, inappropriate, and ineffective.

A second limitation is that stress management programs oversimplify the problem

of stress. The usual stress management approaches rest on the misconception that human beings act in a social and political vacuum. Their intrapsychic interpretation of stress does not even begin to address the institutionalized, oppressive and ongoing stressors that many poor, minority, female, or working people face on a daily basis.

The simplistic view of stress leads to the third limitation of stress management programs. Their intrapsychic view and their emphasis on taking personal responsibility for stress management often support a "blame the victim" attitude. While their techniques have more sophisticated sounding titles, such as "cognitive restructuring" and "stress inoculation", the implicit values are those of Norman Vincent Peale's "positive thinking": "the basic reason a person fails to live a creative and successful life is because of error within himself" (1956). Approaches that ignore social and environmental perspectives often reinforce the common tendency of people to blame themselves when reacting to stress, because the predominantly intrapsychic perspective leads to defining stress problems in purely personal terms.

Our final, and major, criticism of stress management techniques is that they are ultimately self-defeating. The truth of the matter is that instead of offering people strategies to reduce social, political or environmental stressors, the popular stress management approaches undermine the power of people by encouraging a passive attitude and emphasizing personal adjustment. Consequently, these programs serve to reinforce the conditions of the system that create much of the stress in the first place. The popular stress management approaches are not merely discriminatory against the poor and oppressed, they are also misdirected. Their focus is on personal methods of managing stress by learning to adjust to, and accept, aversive conditions. Their emphasis on personal adjustment has fostered a passive, unquestioning acceptance of the status quo. Instead of being activated, people are

pacified. While their stress management efforts reduce the consequences of stress, they divert attention away from the possibility of organizational, community, social, and political efforts to reduce many of the actual stressors themselves. As Schur points out in his analysis of the awareness movement, "There is much talk about taking 'responsibility' for oneself, but little attention to the placing of responsibility for the shape of the society in which we live and which we all sustain." (1976: 194). Until stress management programs begin to address these issues and deal directly with the sense of powerlessness many stressed people feel, these programs are not likely to ameliorate both the causes and effects of stress.

Stress and Power

It is important to understand the issue of power in relation to stress. Society is a broad arena in which groups interplay to maximize their own interests, and to reduce their stressors. Of course, the economically and politically powerful groups have more resources available to respond to stressors. More importantly, however, power is necessary to make or influence decisions concerning the distribution of stressors in the organization and community. The more powerful members of a work organization are able to avoid the hazards, pressures and monotony of many essential tasks by delegating the stressful duties to the less powerful. At the community and society levels, many environmental stressors, such as noise, crowding, and air pollution, are often the byproducts of economic production and a modern society. But the powerful groups are able to insulate their own living environments by restricting many of these stressors to other areas of the community. Thus, the powerful not only have a greater sense of control over the stressors facing them, they also are able frequently to avoid stressors entirely.

Another issue regarding stress and power is that certain members of a society or community have vested interests in a particular stressor. For example, many proposals to reduce noise or air pollution pose an economic threat to those people

who profit from these circumstances. In reaction to this threat, they are likely to use whatever political and economic power they have available to fight these proposals. Consequently, any program proposing the reduction of social and environmental stressors will face some opposition.

It is also sadly ironic that the people with the least power face the most stress, a consequence of which is even greater feelings of powerlessness. This situation suggests the possibility that stressors may actually be used by the powerful to maintain and enhance their superior position. For example, certain job related stressors, such as harrassment, authoritarian supervision, and bureaucratic inertia, often foster a sense of resignation among workers and constantly reinforce their feelings of powerlessness. Attempts to reduce these stressors may be seen as strategies to undermine the current system of power and are likely to be opposed by those who benefit from the present circumstances.

Stress must be seen in its political and social context in order to reduce it. We must recognize environmental, economic and political realities if we are to be effective. Given that many stressors are distributed unevenly in our society, that certain members of our society have vested interests in these stressors, and that stressors can be used to maintain power over others, the possibility of reducing stress becomes much more complex, challenging, and, perhaps, stressful.

Recommendations

Community psychologists and other helping professionals must expand their stress management programs to include the advocacy of environmental and social change, and the promotion of greater involvement of all organization and community members in the decisions regarding the equitable distribution and effective control of stressors.

One initial approach is, in addition to informing people of the causes and

consequences of stress, to put stress in its political, economic and institutional context. We can help people answer such questions as: "Who decides where it will be noisy, who will be overcrowded, what will be polluted, and who will be overworked?"; "Who profits by these stressors?"; and "What institutional functions do the consequences of these stressors serve?" By alerting people to the political, economic and institutional nature of stress, we avoid simplistic definitions of the problem and give people a more realistic perception of the challenges and opposition they face in reducing stress.

Once people are informed and sensitized to the issues, we can then encourage collective strategies as well as personal techniques to reduce stress. We can foster cohesiveness by facilitating the sharing of common grievances regarding stressors and by pointing out their common interests. Such an approach avoids the tendency of individuals to become enveloped in self-concerns by presenting an alternative to self-enclosed and apolitical perspectives. It also combats their tendency to blame themselves because they begin to realize that stress-related problems are not personal, but social symptoms, reflecting social ills.

We can point out that our goal is neither to foster complacency nor to encourage only adjustment, but to invite people to participate in collective action to promote community and social change. This change can best be achieved by focused, collective effots to achieve specific goals. It involves the systematic collection and dissemination of information about the confronting stressors and their consequences. It requires the development of collective power through common interest groups, worker unions, community action groups, and political parties. Its strategies include political lobbying, using the media, threatening economic boycotts, petitioning, presenting class action suits, and organizing labor strikes. Feeling relaxed may help an individual participate more effectively in this demanding process, but it cannot substitute for these efforts.

Finally, we must also recognize that the packaging and commercializing of stress management programs will undermine collective efforts to reduce stress. Presenting relaxation and adjustment to stressors as a commodity to be purchased and consumed by only those who can affort it goes completely contrary to the value of social responsibility necessary for successful collective action.

Instead of a focus on personal adjustment strategies, we need to encourage empowerment approaches to dealing with stress. Instead of passive acceptance, our goal must be to enhance active, assertive and critical perspectives. Instead of sedating, we need to sensitize. Instead of reinforcing self-blame in the hopes of motivating self-change, we need to present a systems view of stress in the hopes of promoting systems-change.

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